

"THE UNDERSTUDY"

Written by

Bruce Kane

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bk@kaneprod.com

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LIGHTS UP on the stage set of a HOTEL ROOM with an UPSTAGE DOOR. In the OFFSTAGE AREA, an ACTOR is standing in front of a full length mirror doing vocal exercises and admiring himself. The DIRECTOR and the ACTRESS enter arguing, trailed by the STAGE MANAGER who is carrying a clipboard

ACTRESS

(always dramatic)

Not on your life. There is no way I am going on to that stage, in front of all those people... naked.

DIRECTOR

I'm not asking you to go out there naked.

ACTRESS

But you explicitly said...

DIRECTOR

I'm asking you to go out there nude.

ACTRESS

I fail to see the difference.

DIRECTOR

Being naked on stage is just taking your clothes off to titillate the prurient interests of the masses. But, when an actress, a real actress, goes on stage nude... That's art.

ACTRESS

Then you go out there "nude."

ACTOR

(nervously)

Do... uh... I have to go out there nude?

DIRECTOR

Don't be ridiculous.

(The Actor breathes a sigh of relief)

STAGE MANAGER

What do you wanna do, boss? Send the audience home?

DIRECTOR

Send the audience home? Send the audience home?? You ever hear the expression "the show must go on?"

STAGE MANAGER

Yes.

DIRECTOR

And you know why the show must go on?

STAGE MANAGER

No.

DIRECTOR

Because if the show doesn't go on, we'd have to give back all the money.

STAGE MANAGER

What are we gonna do?

DIRECTOR

Give me that.

(takes the Stage
Manager's clipboard
and writes)

Now go out there and read this to the audience.

STAGE MANAGER

Me? I'm not an actor.

DIRECTOR

I'm just asking you to read what I wrote, not the final act of King Lear.

*(The Stage Manager walks
downstage and nervously begins
to read)*

STAGE MANAGER

Due to the completely unprofessional conduct of our leading actress...

ACTRESS

Unprofessional? I am not unprofessional. You can call me a lot of things...

DIRECTOR

And many people have.

STAGE MANAGER

... who was to perform the role as written when she begged to be cast in the part.

ACTRESS

Beg? Beg? I have never begged for a role in my life.

STAGE MANAGER

We are sorry to announce that Barbara Andrews will not be appearing as previously announced. In her place...

ACTRESS

In my place? You're going to send out a nobody in my place?

DIRECTOR

Of course, I'm not sending out a nobody.

STAGE MANAGER

No one will be playing the part of Helen.

DIRECTOR

I'm sending out... nobody.

ACTRESS

Nobody is going to play my part?

DIRECTOR

That's right. And she'll give ten times the performance you would have.

ACTOR

(nervously)

You want me to play the scene alone.

DIRECTOR

That's right.

ACTOR

(even more nervous)

Nobody on stage. Just me.

DIRECTOR

Just you.

ACTOR

Not her?

DIRECTOR

Not her. Just you, the spotlight and the audience

ACTOR

I love it.

(The Actor walks behind the hotel room set.)

ACTRESS

Don't you think the audience is going to notice that something isn't quite right?

DIRECTOR

That's the glory of theater. The audience will see whatever we want them to see. It's called the willing suspension of disbelief.

ACTRESS

I don't believe this myself.

(The upstage door opens. The Actor enters holding the hand on the non-existence actress. He does his lines as though to a live and present actress. By the way, he is a huge ham)

ACTOR

I never thought this moment would actually come. You and me, at last alone.

(pauses as though listening the non-existence actress's line. He will do this as required for the scene to play out)

What's that? I seem nervous. It's only my excitement at seeing you like this... so exquisitely, so tastefully, so artistically...

(voice drops three octaves)

...nude.

DIRECTOR

Look at that... The audience doesn't even miss you.

ACTOR

Kiss you? Now? You want me to kiss you? Oh, my darling.

(Takes the non-existent actress into his arms and mime's kissing her. Of course he overdoes it.)

DIRECTOR

This is working out even better than I expected. The audience is imagining you in ways you could never have lived up to.

ACTRESS

I would knocked them on their collective ass.

ACTOR

You're so beautiful, my darling. That alabaster skin.

DIRECTOR

That's your skin he would have been talking about.

ACTOR

That face... It's the face of an angel.

DIRECTOR

That's your face he would have been admiring.

ACTOR

That lustrous. That swan like neck

DIRECTOR

That's your neck he would have been extolling.

ACTOR

And those...

(gestures with both
hands)

Those... Those...

DIRECTOR

Right now everybody out there would have been staring at your...

ACTOR

Eyes.

DIRECTOR

Those too.

ACTOR

Where are you going, my darling?

(pause)

Yes... Of course, I'll wait... Till the end of time.

*(The upstage door opens and
then closes)*

DIRECTOR

Too bad the audience is seeing her and not you. The men out there lusting after her and not you.

ACTRESS

The women hating me and not her.
(projects her voice
dramatically)

Michael, my darling.

ACTOR

(confused))

Yes? Yes, my beloved?

ACTRESS

I'm almost ready my love.

DIRECTOR

(to Actress)

Will you keep it down.

ACTRESS

Are you ready, my handsome?

ACTOR

Like you wouldn't believe.

ACTRESS

(to Director)

Nobody steals my spotlight.

DIRECTOR

To be completely accurate... "nobody" is stealing your
spotlight.

ACTRESS

The bitch. I'll show them hair... I'll show them
shoulders... I'll show them
(pause)

...eyes.

DIRECTOR

What are you talking about? You said you'd never go out
there naked.

ACTRESS

(starts to remove her
dress)

I'm an artist and artists never go on stage naked. They go
on stage... nude!!

*(She steps behind the hotel
room set. A moment later her
dress and a few other items
coming flying out.)*

ACTRESS (O.S.)

(sweetly)

I'm coming my darling.

(to Stage Manager

sounding like

General Patton)

You... Open that damn door.

(The stage manager runs back behind the hotel room set. A moment later the upstage door opens. Another moment and the Actress's bare leg appears seductively in the doorway.)

BLACKOUT